

Consciousness-Raising

Husband Abuse

by Wendy McElroy

No man is safe when personal responsibility is undermined.

On December 4, 1990, Stanley Green locked himself in his car to get away from his abusive wife. Breaking in, she shoved him down face-first into the passenger seat, planting her knees in his back. She used a hefty cellular phone to club him repeatedly across the side of the head.

In a telephone interview, Green described what happened when he tried to report the attack to the police. "Blood streamed down my face. Internal injuries dislocated my ribs. Lacerations and multiple abrasions marked my back and groin. My attacker had no injuries. I told the officer that I wanted the crime report to note my injuries and the names of witnesses. He responded: 'We ain't takin' a report from you, buddy.'" The Long Beach police refused to take Green seriously because he was a man. And, as we all know, women do not beat up men.

Yet Murray A. Straus, co-director of the Family Research Laboratory, can point to at least 30 studies of domestic violence that show both sexes to be equally responsible for starting and continuing spousal abuse. Some of the studies, he cautions, leave "out data on women abusing men . . . because it's politically incorrect."¹ The National Family Violence Surveys of 1975 and 1985 concluded that men are as likely to become victims of domestic violence as women. A 1988 survey of couples in Calgary found the rate of severe husband-to-wife violence to be 4.8%, while the severe wife-to-husband violence was 10%.² More recently, on July 11, 1994, the U.S. Department of

Justice released a study on violence against women that claimed women committed "spousal" homicide at approximately the same rate as men did. Indeed, this statistic has been stable for the last two decades.

Every year, thousands of women seek safety at shelters for battered women. In 1974, the first battered women's shelter in the U.S. opened its doors in St. Paul, Minnesota. By 1990, over 1,500 shelters offered protection to women. But not to Stanley Green.

In California, the shelter for battered men closest to Green was run by the Community United Against Violence (CUAV) in San Francisco. The CUAV is geared toward gay men. In San Luis Obispo, California, men's rights activist David Gross is currently organizing the Allen Wells Memorial Fund for Battered Husbands. Wells recently committed suicide after losing custody of his children to an abusive wife.

Today, in St. Paul, George Gilliland, Sr. — the director of the Domestic Rights Coalition — has set up a shelter for men, after years of effort. Gilliland is an abused man whose wife hit him on the head with a board, a protruding nail narrowly

missing his eye. Gilliland claims that women's organizations in the twin cities have tried to block his efforts to aid abused men. Why? Perhaps they fear scarce government resources would be diverted away from women.

In their book *Intimate Violence*, Straus and coauthor R.J. Gelles comment, "Unfortunately, the scarcity of resources has not led to agencies and institutions banding together to lobby and demand more resources for the prevention and treatment of family violence. Instead, as is often the case when the need is great and the resources are small, there has been fierce competition for the limited resources that are available."

After his attack, Stanley Green approached several battered women's shelters. They would not even answer his questions over the phone. "How should I handle the police?" he asked one woman. "We don't know what to say to a man," she replied. "What would you say to a woman?" he pressed on. He got no answers.

Yet most shelters receive government funding, which requires non-discrimination on the basis of race or sex. In 1994, Congress allocated \$1.5 billion to combat violence against women. Most of the money will go to

advocacy groups such as the Battered Women's Justice Project. And men will pay taxes to support a program that explicitly excludes them.

What has happened to women's sense of fair play? In a word: ideology. Domestic violence is no longer a criminal act but an ideological one, a hate crime that men commit against women. The official feminist line on domestic violence has two components: (1) wife-beating is epidemic and on the upswing, and (2) such violence against men is virtually nonexistent.

Is domestic violence on the rise? Not necessarily. The Thirteenth World Congress of Sociology on July 19, 1994 reported that male-on-female violence had been gradually decreasing over the last decade. Female-on-male violence was increasing.

In fact, violence in general seems to be on the decline. According to the Department of Justice's National Crime Victimization Survey, nearly 22.1 million U.S. households in 1992 — just under 23% of all households nationwide — were directly affected

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by crime. This is both the lowest number and the smallest percentage of households victimized since the inception of the "households-touched-by-crime" indicator in 1975.

Yet on August 30, 1994, CBS correspondent Bob Arnot reported that domestic battery is the leading cause of injury to American woman between the ages of 15 and 44. This figure was derived from the study of a single, very poor inner-city neighborhood. The principal investigator for the study, Dr. Jeane Anne Grisso, has cautioned against using any of its conclusions to apply more generally to other populations.

Now consider the second claim of the feminist orthodoxy: that domestic violence against men is virtually nonexistent. The media hurries to trumpet

this misinformation. Newspapers such as the *Houston Chronicle*³ throw around such figures as "only 2% of domestic violence is directed at men." And for once, the police agree with the media. In cases of domestic violence, the Houston police department uses the word batterer interchangeably with the word male.

Abused men are in a position similar to that of women who were raped three or four decades ago. They are reluctant to go to the police or even admit the abuse occurred. Why? Because they think, "No one will believe me"; "I will be blamed for the crime"; "I will be ridiculed"; "I will be further traumatized by an unsympathetic system."

Keith O'Donnel works with abused men. After hearing tales of police refusing to take reports, O'Donnel decided to check out the situation himself. "I posed as an abused man and I asked two lawyers for help. They suggested that I get help (mental help for me, not her). I called the abuse hot lines and they too suggested that I get help (for me — not her) and politely told me that I absolutely could not stay with them." O'Donnel recommends that skeptics repeat his experiment.

O'Donnel explains the trauma of abused men, "Abused women are accepted today and helped. Men are not so. They are silent. It *isn't* pride. . . . Abused men don't feel pride — it has been destroyed. They feel *shame* — soul-shattering shame."

Eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Europe had a custom called *charivari*, in which an abused husband was dressed as a woman and forced to ride through the village, sitting backwards on a donkey. If the man escaped this punishment, his nearest neighbor was forced to take his place. After all, the neighbor had permitted such an unnatural act to go on under his nose.

Armin A. Brott comments on the twentieth-century equivalent of *charivari*. "Take Skip W., who participated in a program on domestic violence on the short-lived *Jesse Jackson Show* in 1991. Skip related how his wife repeatedly hit him and attacked him with knives and scissors. The audience's reaction was exactly what male victims who go public fear most: laughter and constant derisive snickering."

Included on the list of abused men is no less a figure than Abraham Lincoln. Mary Lincoln was known to hit him with firewood, to throw coffee in his face, to beat him with a broom, to pelt him with potatoes and books. Lincoln sought refuge with neighbors and friends — and, some say, in the Oval Office.

Yet many feminists would maintain that Mary must have been acting in self-

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defense when she fired those potatoes at the president's head. They claim that women's violence is always in self-defense. Again, what do the data say about this claim?

In her unpublished Ph.D. thesis, Dr. Reena Sommer accumulated data on domestic violence from approximately 450 men and 450 women.⁴ She followed up on this research two years later. Her study concluded that women were more likely than men to initiate both severe and minor violence. The Straus and Geller studies back up this conclusion.

Nevertheless, it is sometimes argued that violence against women is more *important* than violence against men, because women are more likely to be seriously injured. Perhaps, but women are also more likely to use a weapon. A 1984 study of 6,200 cases found that 86% of female-on-male violence involved weapons. By contrast, only 25% in cases of male-on-female violence involved weapons.⁵

According to Jim Sniechowski and Judith Sherven, a husband-and-wife team who speak out on gender issues, "To offset men's larger physiques, women more often use weapons than do men (82% of women, 25% of men). A woman with a knife, scissors, gun, lamp, frying pan, and the like can be very dangerous and damaging." Besides which, not all men are larger

than all women. Stanley Green's wife weighed 200 pounds.

Despite these statistics, the courts are beginning to legally recognize women as helpless victims. Consider the trial of Laurie Kyles for manslaughter. Kyles shot her husband in January 1994 after a quarrel in which he pinned her on the bed. No other violence was charged. There had been no history of prior physical abuse.

In her closing argument, the prosecutor Maria Leslie reminded the jury that the law does not allow people to kill each other over a quarrel. "You can't blow people away simply because they're yelling and screaming at you, no matter how much you're sick of it."⁶ Laurie Kyles was acquitted. Why? Because she was a psychologically battered woman. Because women are victims.

Crime and punishment now revolve around genitalia, and — legally speaking — men have the wrong equipment. Indeed, the only right men seem to have retained in full is the right to remain silent. But silence

cannot cloak the fact that violence is wrong, regardless of who commits it.

Keith O'Donnel has issued an appeal to feminists over the Internet. "Consider this . . . an unhealed abused man may have a high probability of becoming an abuser or of raising abusers. . . . A healed abused man will respect your rights. An abused man will look at you as a person who can and will destroy him if given the opportunity."

Our society has a deep commitment to the myth of women as helpless and innocent. At the same time, we bring up girls to believe it is acceptable to strike a man: "If he gets fresh, just slap him across the face." And when a woman hits a man, the attitude of observers is often, "Good for her." Meanwhile, men are told to never hit a woman, even in self-defense. And when they do accept abuse without hitting back, society laughs at them.

Domestic violence is clouded by gender myths and politics. The fog must be cleared away. Spousal abuse is a dynamic in which both people partic-

ipate, for which both people bear some responsibility. Domestic violence is a crime that needs prevention as much as it needs punishment. But first we must take a deep breath, cast aside our preconceptions, and examine the issue realistically.

Stanley Green has learned this lesson the hard way. I asked him for the most important thing he could tell people about domestic violence. "Educate yourself," he replied. "The best prevention is education. If I had recognized the signs of abuse I might have taken steps earlier to protect my children and myself." □

Notes:

1. *Washington Times*, January 31, 1994.
2. Brinkerhoff and Lupri, *Canadian Journal of Sociology* 13:4 (1988).
3. June 12, 1994.
4. Department of Sociology, University of Manitoba, June 1994.
5. McLeod, *Justice Quarterly* 2 (1984), pp. 171-193.
6. Quoted in the *Omaha World Herald*, July 1, 1994.

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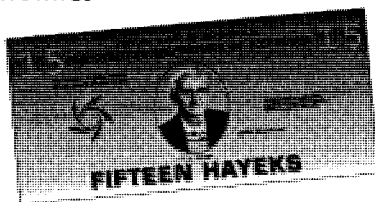
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